

# Communicating with Parents/Guardians During a School *Emergency*

Virginia Beach City Public Schools  
Virginia Beach, Virginia

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# Background Information

## Virginia Beach City Public Schools

- **2<sup>ND</sup> largest** school division in Virginia
- **87** schools/centers
- **75,000** students
- **11,000** employees
- **68,000** students transported daily
- **600** school buses



# \_\_\_ \_\_ I T Happens

- March 25, 2005** Bank Executive Shot to Death. Three Schools in Lockdown as Police Search for Suspect.
- May 2, 2005** Shots Near Beach Library Prompts Lockdown in Five Schools. Two Suspects Taken into Custody at Virginia Beach Alternative School.
- October 20, 2005** Three School Buses Struck by Bullets Prompts Lockdown of Middle School.
- October 24, 2005** Head on Collision With School Bus Leaves One Dead and One Critically Injured.
- October 31, 2005** Seven Injured in Virginia Beach School Bus Accident- Thirteen Students Transported to Hospital.
- November 8, 2005** Child Dies After Being Struck By School Bus.
- December 1, 2005** Jogger Dies After Being Struck by School Bus.

In order to communicate effectively *during* a school emergency you must have a plan for the three phases.

1. *Before* an emergency
2. *During* an emergency
3. *After* the emergency

# The Best Crisis Communications Plan Starts with Being *Prepared*.





# **Crisis Communications**

## **Joint Crisis Communications Plan**

In a large-scale crisis, the message communicated to parents requires inter-agency coordination. Due to the complexity of the event, multiple agencies will be involved in crafting the message.

- Police
- Fire
- Emergency Medical Services
- City Communications
- School Communications

# **Joint City/Schools Crisis Communications Plan**

- Reviewed and updated during school year.
- Tested through an interagency tabletop disaster (Fall 2002).
- Field tested on April 11, 2005.

# ***Joint Information Center (JIC)***

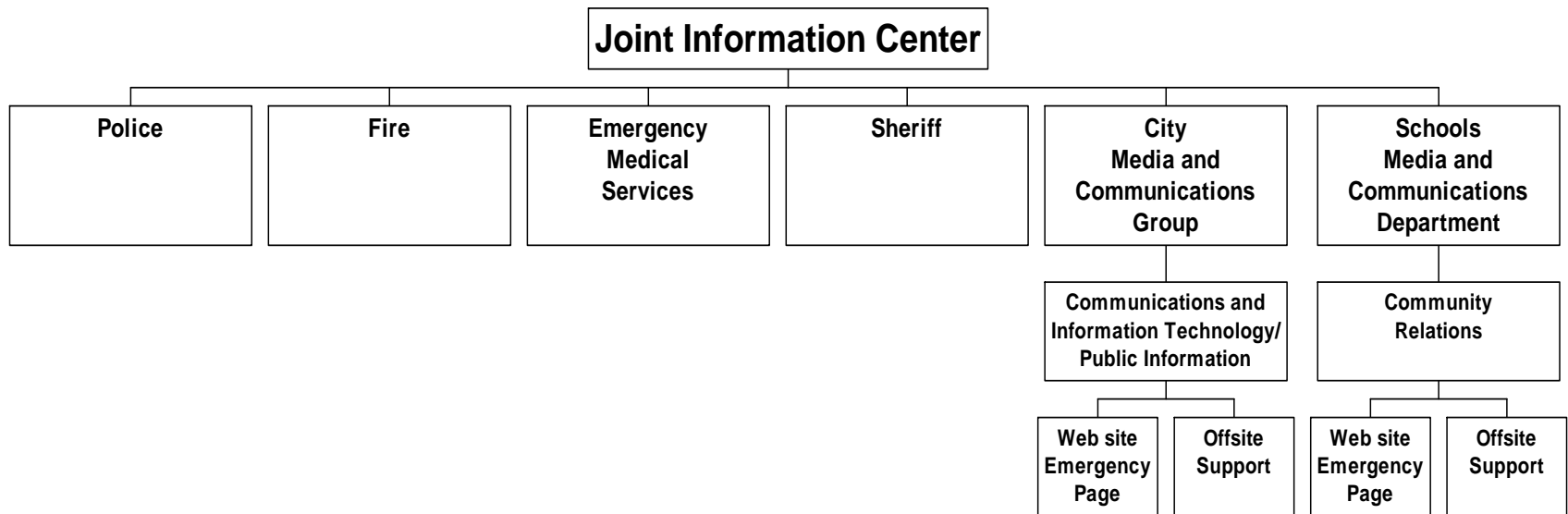
## ***During a School Emergency/Crisis***

- The lead PIO will be from the lead agency, responding to the emergency, or a designee of that agency's choosing.
- The JIC, under the supervision of incident command, will handle all release of information to the media.
- JIC responsibilities will include: staffing of center, identifying a media holding center, identifying appropriate spokespersons, setting up media briefing schedules, writing/approving news releases, and approving message points, release of video footage, and other related material.



# ***Virginia Beach City Public Schools***

## **EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS COMMAND STRUCTURE**



# One Critical Target Audience: *Parents*

Why did we target parents/guardians?

Application process for the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant revealed a *gap* and *inconsistencies* in the *notification process* for parents/guardians during a large-scale school emergency.

In other words, we did not have a division-wide plan!



# What is our message for parents?

1. To **assure** parents that the school division is prepared to respond to a school emergency.
2. To **advise** parents how they can be prepared for a school emergency.
3. To **inform** parents how they can get important information during a school emergency.
4. To **educate** parents about key terms that will be used during a school emergency (e.g., internal/external lockdowns, shelter-in-place).
5. To **provide** parents with guidelines on what will be needed to pick up their child in the school or at an alternate location should the school be evacuated.

# Parent School Emergency Guide

As a **parent** how can  
you  
be prepared for a  
school **emergency**?

# Parent School Emergency Guide

## Focus is on Educating Parents

**Internal Lockdown:** All school interior doors are locked and students are confined to their classrooms and no entry or exit of the school is allowed. This takes place if there is a threat or possible threat inside the school.

**External lockdown:** All school exterior doors are locked. This takes place if the threat is outside of the school.

**Shelter-in-Place:** Selecting small, interior rooms in the school, with no or few windows, and taking refuge there until it is safe to release students.

**Reunification of parents/students:** Each school has a procedure for helping parents locate their child. Parents will be directed to a specific location where they will be required to show proper identification.



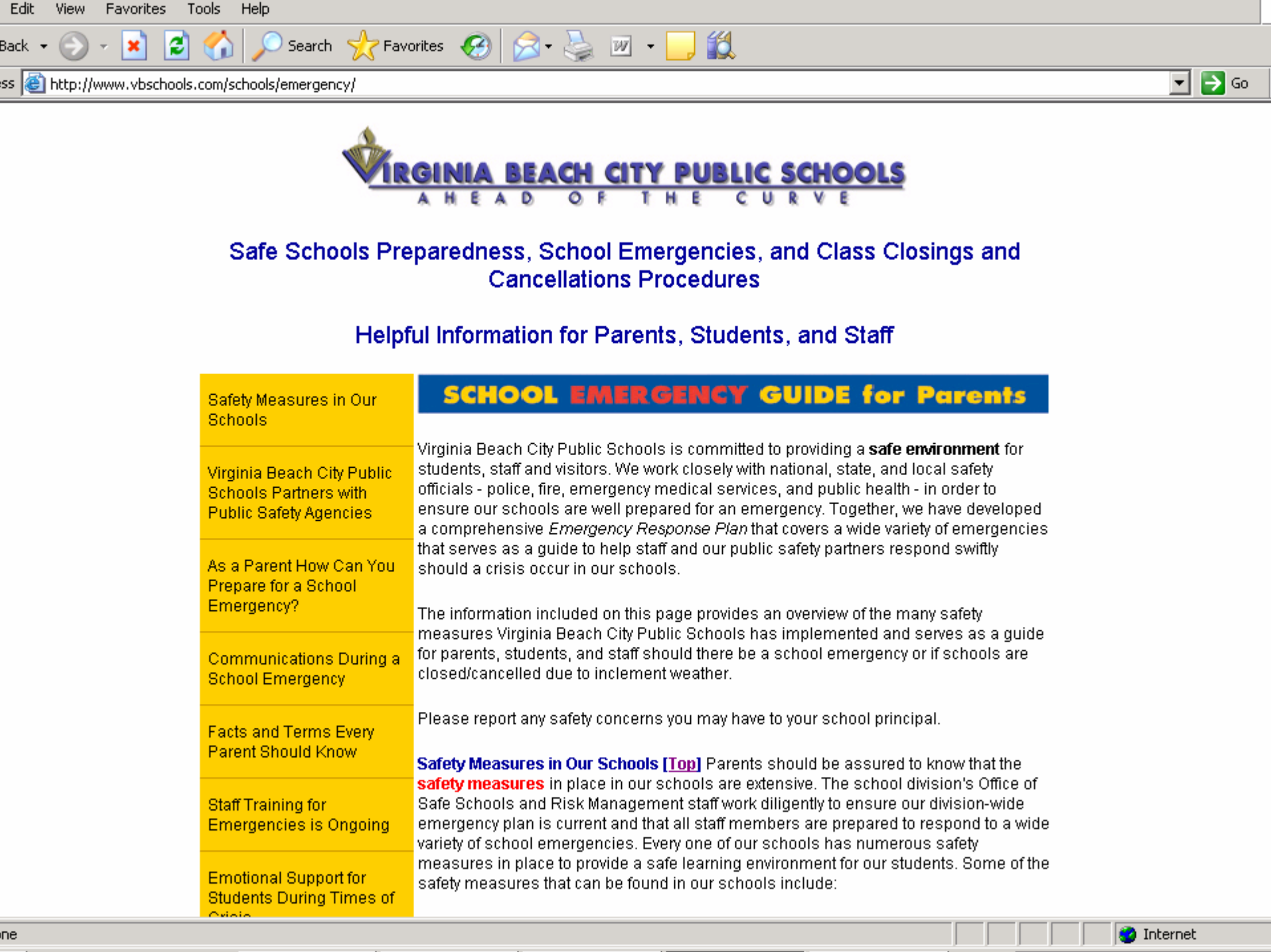
# How did we distribute the brochure?

- At the start of the 2005-2006 school year, each school received one brochure per student.  
**83,100 brochures** were printed along with 10,000 emergency wallet size cards.



# How did we market the brochure?

- Parent Newsletter- Apple A Day
- Employee Newsletter - Kaleidoscope
- Municipal cable television station (VBTV)
- Message on Hold (MOH)
- Training (School Staff)
- School division Web site [\*www.vbschools.com\*](http://www.vbschools.com)
- Electronic subscription service via e-mail (vbschools x-tra)
- Online Survey



## Safe Schools Preparedness, School Emergencies, and Class Closings and Cancellations Procedures

### Helpful Information for Parents, Students, and Staff

Safety Measures in Our Schools	<b>SCHOOL EMERGENCY GUIDE for Parents</b>
Virginia Beach City Public Schools Partners with Public Safety Agencies	Virginia Beach City Public Schools is committed to providing a <b>safe environment</b> for students, staff and visitors. We work closely with national, state, and local safety officials - police, fire, emergency medical services, and public health - in order to ensure our schools are well prepared for an emergency. Together, we have developed a comprehensive <i>Emergency Response Plan</i> that covers a wide variety of emergencies that serves as a guide to help staff and our public safety partners respond swiftly should a crisis occur in our schools.
As a Parent How Can You Prepare for a School Emergency?	The information included on this page provides an overview of the many safety measures Virginia Beach City Public Schools has implemented and serves as a guide for parents, students, and staff should there be a school emergency or if schools are closed/cancelled due to inclement weather.
Communications During a School Emergency	Please report any safety concerns you may have to your school principal.
Facts and Terms Every Parent Should Know	<b>Safety Measures in Our Schools</b> <a href="#">[Top]</a> Parents should be assured to know that the <b>safety measures</b> in place in our schools are extensive. The school division's Office of Safe Schools and Risk Management staff work diligently to ensure our division-wide emergency plan is current and that all staff members are prepared to respond to a wide variety of school emergencies. Every one of our schools has numerous safety measures in place to provide a safe learning environment for our students. Some of the safety measures that can be found in our schools include:
Staff Training for Emergencies is Ongoing	Emotional Support for Students During Times of Crisis

**VBCPS On-line  
Subscription Service****vbschools X-tra****School Closings & Cancellations**

If you would like to be notified of school closings and cancellations due to holidays, inclement weather, or emergency situations, subscribe below. Every effort will be made to ensure you receive your subscription service in a timely fashion. However, certain technical conditions beyond our control may cause a delay. Virginia Beach City Public Schools is not responsible for messages that are lost or significantly delayed due to transmission via the Internet.

**SUBSCRIBE/UNSUBSCRIBE**

Last Modified on January 19, 2005

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# Online Parent Safe Schools Survey

October 24 – November 23, 2005

## Three Questions

1. As a parent, are you aware that should there be an emergency in your child's school that you would call 263.1000 to obtain important/updated information?

**Yes** 18.87%      **No** 81.13%

2. Do you believe your child's school is prepared to respond appropriately should there be an emergency?

**Yes** 73.58%      **No** 26.42%

3. Are you a subscriber to vbschools-xtra's School Closings and Cancellations list?

**Yes** 64.15%      **No** 35.85%



# Real Life School Emergency

October 20, 2005

Lynnhaven Middle School - 1400 Students



# What happened and how we responded.

- Two bus drivers during their elementary school runs reported that their buses had been hit by an object at 2:50 p.m. Middle school dismissal time is 3:40 p.m.
- A third bus transporting 2 high school students from school reported having a window shot out.
- Police immediately respond and placed the school on an external lockdown.
- At the same time, the police department receives calls about numerous gun shots that were heard in a neighborhood near the middle school.
- Swat Team and K-9 Unit responds.



# What happened and how we responded.

- Emergency Hotline (off-site) activated at 4:00 p.m.
- Police determine school should remain in an external lockdown until wooded area west of the school grounds is searched.
- Department of Media and Communications releases message to television stations that building is in a lockdown and states that the buses will not be transporting students home. However, students will be released to their parents.
- Television stations report a “shooter” and encourage parents to pick up students from school.

# What happened and how we responded.

- Approximately 200 parents report to school to pick up students.
- Emergency hot line handled approximately 400 incoming phone calls from 4:00 – 7:00 p.m.
- At 5:45 p.m. police advise releasing one bus at a time with a police escort for each bus.
- 6:30 p.m. last school bus is released.
- Last students leave the school at 7:15 p.m.



# Communication After an Emergency

## **Critical information must be delivered to parents.**

- Determine how best to communicate: letter, Web site, meeting
- Issue facts regarding incident, to include:
  - Correct any inaccurate information released by the media
  - Share actions taken by school administration
  - Provide additional safety precautions in place
  - Stress the importance of student safety
- Ensure that staff members receive the same accurate information that will be provided to parents.
- Communicate to parents signs of post-traumatic stress, services and resources that schools can provide for students and parents, and other resources within the community.

# Lessons Learned

- As incident unfolds, commander (Police Sergeant-Police Lieutenant-SWAT Lieutenant) can change making it difficult to get a timely message to parents.
- TV reporters can omit important parts of message.
- TV reporters can create unnecessary panic and hysteria.
- Schools need a prearranged staging area for parents and have signage directing parents to area.
- Parents were patient, and appreciative of the efforts of school administration and police.
- Parents used the hotline (263-1000).
- The emergency hotline relieved pressure for school staff.

# Lessons Learned

- Police assistance is needed to keep media away from school grounds during the incident and upon return to school.
- Incident at one school can impact multiple schools.
- Should have activated the school's answering service with a message directing them to the hotline and provided general information about the incident.
- Should have used our school division's Web site to post the same information we were releasing to the media. This would have reduced confusion on the particulars of the incident.



## Emergency Conditions Update

VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

**Please click your reload/refresh button to view the most current version.**

**This Page Last Updated December 22, 2005 4:30 PM**

### **Emergency Notice – Lynnhaven Middle School**

An incident occurred at 2:50 p.m. today at the corner of Old Donation Parkway and Great Neck Road. Three school buses – Bus 290 from Bayside Health Sciences Academy; Bus 672 from Trantwood Elementary; and Bus 578 from Tallwood Global Studies/Salem Visual and Performing Arts academies – were hit by projectiles, the nature of which is as yet undetermined.

As a result, Lynnhaven Middle School is now on an external lockdown as a result of the incident. Students will be released to their parents only. No walkers will be released. Buses will not be transporting students until police authorize their bus runs.

**NOTICE:** Every effort is made to keep this page current. Certain technical conditions beyond our control may prevent us from providing you the most accurate and up to date closings and cancellations. We suggest that you also tune in to local TV and radio stations.

You may also call the 24-hour Beachline at 427-8000 and enter code #856 for a current recording on the status of school closings or delays.

[Virginia Beach City Public Schools Web Site](#)

[School Calendars](#)

[School Hours](#)

**[Important Employee Information for Inclement Weather](#)**  
**[Emergency Arrival/Dismissal Matrix](#)**



# *Virginia Beach City Public Schools*

*Committed* to providing a *safe environment* for students, staff, and visitors.

## **Questions?**

# **Virginia Beach City Public Schools**

**[www.vbschools.com](http://www.vbschools.com)**

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